



Why free play is good?

In today's western world we have been encouraged to think success in life is all about academic achievement and the only way to achieve this success is through providing our children with 'academic enrichment' games and services. These enrichment activities can start well before school age and tend to gain momentum as the child ages. This, the "stranger danger" phenomenon and our busy lifestyles have led to a decline in children and youngsters play time especially unstructured free play.

Play is very important in the growth and development of all youngsters. It helps with their physical, emotional, social and intellectual development. In general terms, play come in two categories: unstructured (free play) or structured play. Both forms are important.

Structured play is directed by an adult with a goal in mind. It helps children learn to follow rules and routines, and give opportunity for development of physical and social skills.

Unstructured free play is not led by an adult and has no goal. It may move from activity to activity, and may involve other children and possibly adults. This type of play allows children to explore and develop the skills needed for negotiating life without feeling pressured or fearful of making mistakes.



Most play involves some physical activity, either hand skills or larger body movements. Play allows the child to gain strength, coordination and control over their movements, as well as physical fitness.

Free unstructured play helps children learn about society and their emotions, especially through imaginative role play, where they pretend to be an adult. This helps them understand the society they live in and how to relate to others. They gain skills such as turn taking, sharing, negotiating and managing conflict.

Youngsters learn from their peers and they enjoy playing together. This is a great learning ground for acquiring communication skills. The better children can express and make themselves understood, the less anxious and frustrated they will be, and the more relaxed they will be about new experiences and challenges.

The practice they gain from role playing helps them conquer their fears and develop the confidence to independently deal with new situations.

Free play helps youngsters gain a sense of who they are, their likes and dislikes, strengths and abilities, and to respect the differences, thoughts and feelings of others.

They build on what they know and explore different experiences in imaginative ways, enhancing their thinking and problem solving skills and their ability to entertain themselves.

Why is the lack of free play a problem?

Over the past 20 to 30 years, in an attempt to ensure their children's success, parents have filled their children's weeks with organised activities so there is little time for creative imaginative free play. This may account for the rise in anxiety, depression and suicide experienced by a growing number of our young adults. Studies have linked feelings of anxiety and depression to perfectionism.

Perfectionism often comes from highly critical parents who expect excellence, which may produce overly self-critical children. Some may have learned success must happen at any cost and become anxious to get the perfect marks at the expense of values such as honesty and integrity. This is believed to have contributed to the increase in cheating in our high schools and universities. Perfectionism reduces creativity and is not good for society.

If we wish to reverse the trend of depression, anxiety and perfectionism among our youngsters, society and parents need to revisit their ideas on what success looks like, slow our pace of life down and let our children engage in a balance of structured enrichment activities and unstructured free play.

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/119/1/182>

<https://www.pentagonplay.co.uk/news-and-info/why-free-play-is-crucial-for-early-years-children>

<https://www.verywellfamily.com/unstructured-play-2764971>

